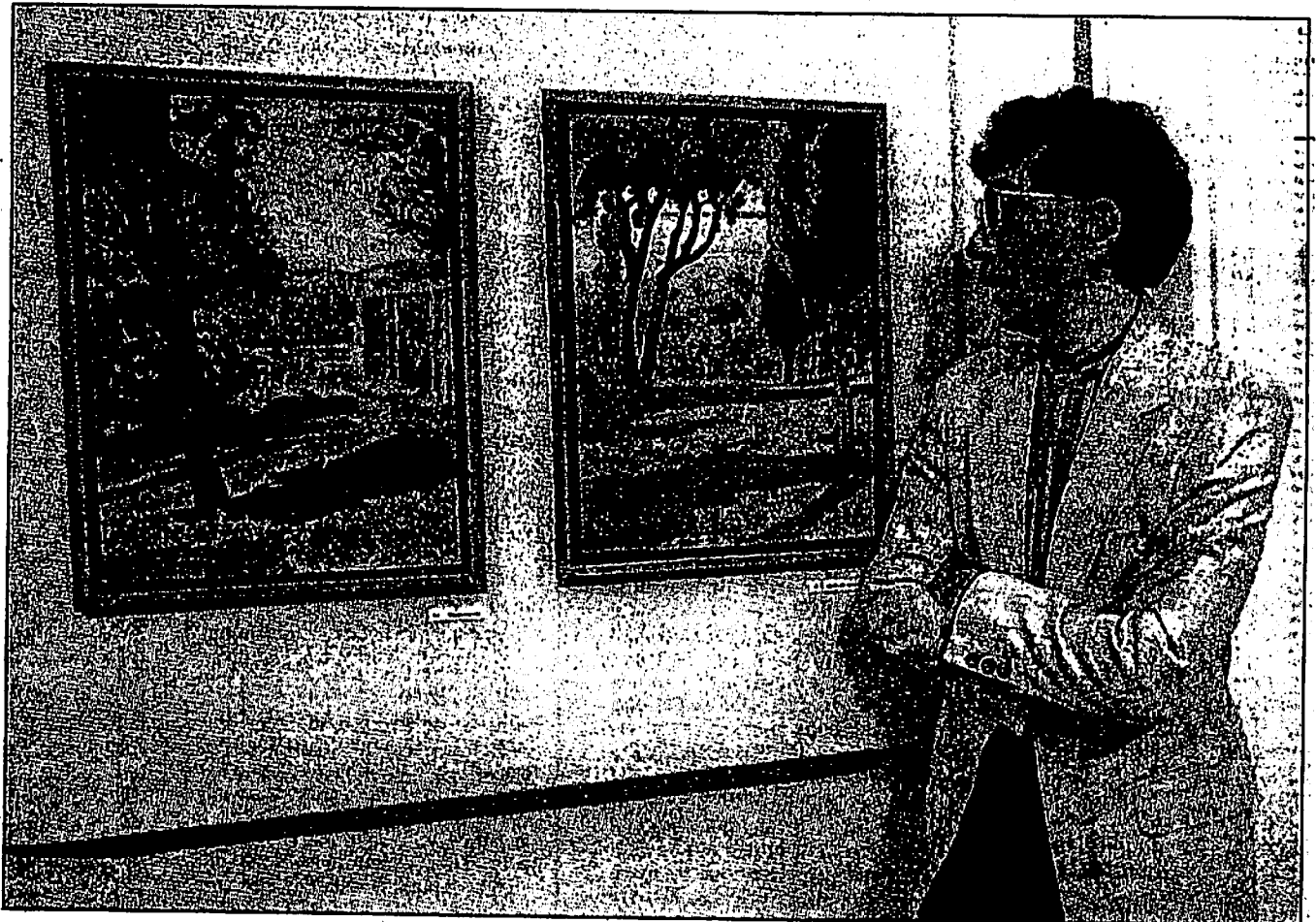


ARTISTS  
LANZA

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# Hingham artist pieces together a solution



**"Greenhouse" (left) and "Just Me and the Shadows" are two of the paintings at the Bumpus show that John Lanza created in Italy.**

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / PAM BERRY

## John Lanza sees painting – and life – as a challenging jigsaw puzzle

By Judith Montminy  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**D**UXBURY – John Lanza Jr. sees jigsaw puzzles wherever he looks. Whether he is arranging the colors and shapes of an Italian landscape on canvas or balancing his interlocked roles as father-teacher-artist, the Hingham native brings the puzzle-solver's analytical eye to the task.

"I think I think like a scientist," said Lanza, 47, whose recent paintings can be seen through Oct. 31 at the Helen Bumpus Gallery in Duxbury.

"I think that's why puzzle pieces help me," he said. "The biggest help in my comprehending composition was . . . viewing design shapes as puzzle pieces – and I love puzzles, like those old wooden ones with funny shapes."

Although he studied art at Hingham High School and continued at Amherst College, it wasn't until he studied with renowned artist Fairfield Porter in Amherst that Lanza fully understood the puzzle theory of composition.

Lanza continues to use the concept regularly with his freshman and sophomore students at the Art Institute of Boston.

"I truly want to demystify it for my students," said Lanza, who won the school's excellence in teaching award in 1992.

He also wants the young artists to understand that even with more than 20 years of experience, he faces the same uncertainty about his own work that they face with theirs.

"As a starting point I must confess I'm almost never feeling like I'm in control" at the beginning of a new painting, he said. "The pain one feels as a student never goes away."

Identifying with his students is important to Lanza, who considers himself an educator first and a painter second.

"Teaching is my main profession," said the Hingham artist. "The art, painting, is something I do. . . . Showing is not a priority in my life."

Just as the puzzle-solver finds the right spot for the individually shaped pieces, Lanza also has fit his roles together.

Professionally, he is a teacher, supported by his network of colleagues. Emotionally he is anchored by his family – wife Kathy and daughters Rebecca, 13, and Maria, 4. They often are the subjects of his painting.

Then there is the artist piece, with its place relegated to the summer or during stolen moments in the school year.

The majority of paintings in the Duxbury show were created over six summers, starting in 1987, when Lanza taught at the Boston Visual School program in Trieste, Italy, east of Venice near the Yugoslavian border. The summer program, run by Boston artist Judy Brown, offered Lanza a break from his regular teaching and family responsibilities along with opportunities for his own artistic journey.

"At first, I remember being daunted by the idea of painting landscapes," he said. "While genre scenes of my family were and continue to be a heartfelt focus, landscapes seemed to be an unnavigable territory."

"I listened to my teacher voice timidly telling my student self that all paintings, regardless of subject matter, are nothing more than shapes of paint," Lanza said. "I try to keep this in mind."

The call of the lush Italian countryside intensified as Lanza encouraged his students at the summer program – sometimes speaking in Italian, sometimes in English, and sometimes in sign language for a student who, like Lanza, was partly deaf.

"Painting is a lot like galloping bareback, particularly when painting outdoors on location," he said. "In a very real sense these many summers were an opening, an awakening for my art."

"Was it the brighter sun? the older buildings? The exuberant people? . . . Maybe everything was just different enough that I woke up and saw what I was looking at," he said.

Seeing what you are looking at is the basic lesson Lanza tries to teach his art students.

Everyone in his class is required to carry two L-shaped cardboard forms. The forms create a portable frame for viewing the world, almost like a camera's viewfinder.

"I try to teach the students to have what a photographer has built into the equipment," Lanza said. "The trick is to get students not to draw what one feels they know is there, but to draw what they actually see . . . to see a visual bunch of relationships and make compositions with shapes as a writer uses words."

Do his students give him hope for art? "Oh, yes indeed . . . just by whatever way their art manifests itself," he said after considering the question for a while. "By choosing to be artists, they, in and of themselves, create the shape of art that is to be." With the spark of a puzzle enthusiast who discovers the right home for the last few pieces, Lanza added, "What a cheerful discovery to color the day!"

► An exhibit of recent paintings by Hingham artist John Lanza at the Helen Bumpus Gallery runs through Oct. 31. The gallery is in the Duxbury Free Library, 147 St. George St., Duxbury. Gallery hours: Monday through Thursday 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Friday and Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday 1-5 p.m. Call (617) 934-2721.

Lanza's work also is included in the faculty exhibition at the Art Institute of Boston, 700 Beacon St., Boston, through Oct. 7. Call (617) 262-1223.